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ABSTRACT

The author expressed the following opinions on vocabulary development: (1) The concept of core vocabulary should be rethought due to the rapid change in our language and society. (2) A formalized, structured vocabulary development program is highly desirable. (3) Despite many existing information media, it is necessary to reintroduce students to reading as the major avenue of information. (4) The students should be carefully introduced to the best stories written today so as to rekindle in them an interest in words and reading. The author's Basic Reading Skills classes are described as an example of a vocabulary development program. In these classes, books used for instruction are chosen for their storytelling qualities. The word list dictionary approach and word card method are used to enhance learning. Contextual and structural analyses are taught through the use of appropriate materials. The two aspects emphasized in the reinforcement and practice program--use of the words in conversation and writing--are strongly recommended. The author also recommends that teachers use new technologies which provide greater individualization and that they devise new learning techniques incorporating more dynamic approaches, laboratory experiences, and experimenting with the use of language tutors. (AW)

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Vocabulary Instruction: Challenge of the Seventies

Shirley Aaronson

As we approach the last quarter of the twentieth century, we find that the composition of our "educational bag" is obviously changing. Higher education is no longer the privileged sanctuary of the intellectual and the financial elite. The gates have been opened to allow entrance to a broader spectrum of the population including the underprivileged and the academically weaker student. Many of these new students have special instructional needs and vocabulary is high on the list of priorities. If it is true for most students that the speaking and writing vocabularies generally lag behind the aural and reading vocabularies, it is probably truer for the student of low socio-economic background. Many of these students have difficulties with parts of speech, endings, speech patterns and pronunciation which is reflected in their poor writing skills. Unless their total language skills are improved, these students will be at a disadvantage in the communication process. As educators, we need to initiate new programs which will be

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geared to the development of all four vocabularies.

The job facing educators has been made more difficult and demanding because of the verbal explosion caused by the expansion of knowledge and technology. Students will need help in adapting to the proliferation of words to keep them from being overwhelmed. First, we must lose some of our fixed ideas about vocabulary instruction and rethink the concept of core vocabulary. Undoubtedly, there is a basic core of words necessary for the communication of ideas, but the difficulty lies in evolving a core list that is truly basic since language is now changing and growing more rapidly than ever. It has been reported that more new English words have come into being in the last fifty years than in the nine hundred years preceeding the twentieth century (5, p. 9). According to Stuart Flexner, senior editor of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, (7, p.169) "the words we use are changing faster today and not merely on the slang level, but on every level. The rapidity with which words come and go is vastly accelerated. Perhaps a full third of this turnover has occurred within the last fifty years alone". How has this come about? Undoubtedly it has been triggered by the new technology and the vast convulsing, political, social and economic changes besetting present day society. Thus the concern over ecology and pollution has helped coin a new galaxy of words such as "fossil-fuels", "recycling" and "biodegradable materials". The concern over the civil rights of minority groups and the effects of racial and ethnic polarization has ushered in such angry terms as: "male-chauvanist pig", "long hair", "law and order" "hard hat" and the "silent majority". Concern over the problem of the consumer has brought attention to such constructs as: "rigged prices: "empty calories" and "consumer protection". Concern over the problem of alienation in the industrial-affluent society has produced such phenonema

as "encounter" and "sensitivity groups" as well as a variety of "communes".

An example of the way technology sparks new words is the new discipline of pharmacogenetics, which is the study of the interaction between "miracle" drugs and the genetics of certain types of body chemistry. It seems that technology rewards us with miracle drugs and now a new form of technology is necessary to protect us from its adverse effects. Another example of the mushrooming of technical terms was provided dramatically by Dr. Kenneth Clark (1, p. 47) in a speech to the American Psychological Association. He urged the study of "psychotechnology" which is the use of drugs to control the "animalistic and primitive propensities in man" in order to protect the masses of human beings from the barbaric use of power by our leaders". As these examples illustrate, perhaps it is more important that our students be challenged to read, grasp and learn about the new forces in our society and the terms to describe them, rather than to focus on words which were more relevant in the past when society was less in a state of flux.

Exposing students to the range of words spurred by the verbal explosion is certainly motivational and interesting, however, it is not enough. Students profit most from direction and guidance and therefore a structured program of vocabulary development incorporating the study of affixes, contextual analysis and dictionary study is highly desirable. The real question then arises as to how this can best be accomplished with students who bring with them a rather impoverished base. In considering this question, several facts of life have to be accepted as representative of the weaker students. Many of these students read little, if at all; the newspapers are given cursory attention because these students are products of the television age and thus have had their "message given to them through other more attractive media". Television has brought their world closer to them

visually, if not intellectually, yet the primacy of the word, as expressed in written thoughts still reigns supreme in college education. Much of our knowledge comes from books which demand disciplined and sustained attention to the word and the thoughts which emerge. Part of our mission as educators is to reintroduce these students to reading as the major avenue of information, before a formalized and structured program of vocabulary instruction can be launched successfully. In effect, students have to drawn back to books to see the relevance of the word.

According to Karlin (4, p.4), "children acquire meaning vocabularies in an easy and natural way prior to and during the early years of school, by listening to and experimenting with words". In the weaker student, this process seems to deteriorate as the student progresses through primary and secondary school, due perhaps to the lack of appropriate listening and conceptual experiences in school and elsewhere. For these students, the early interest in words is never recaptured, but instead becomes subjected to a word study process which deadens their enthusiasm because it seems meaningless, isolated and removed from experience.

Perhaps we can learn from the past in attempting to re-kindle an interest in words. In the old days, storytellers roamed the countryside and held audiences spellbound with their many tales of adventure and fantasy, and in fact provided much of the language experience. There were plenty of non-readers then, but very few non-listeners. Although the roaming storyteller of old is now an anachronism and technologically unemployed, his wares are still very much in demand. He can be artificially recreated by finding him where he exists today, as the unseen voice in novels. People still love to hear and read good stories which is why Malamud, Hemingway, Andeerson, Camus, Faulkner and Steinbeck are very popular today; our students are no different, just somewhat more reluctant to expose themselves to the written story. It is my belief that the key to recapturing their

interest in words is by carefully introducing them to the best storytellers in print today so they can again sit at their feet engrossed in the magic of words, the excitement of plot and the drama of the human experience.

In my Basic Reading Skill classes, books are selected for their storytelling qualities which means that they are written simply and honestly, describing real people and their problems; these books then become the basis for vocabulary instruction. The raw material of vocabulary study is provided by the authors in their choice of words to depict story, characterization, mood and dialogue. Students are charmed and lured to the word by the magic of the story as told by the master. Words become links to thoughts and conveyors of ideas which are intimately connected to the story. The student begins to read with his eyes, listen with his ears and think with his mind as he jouneys through the tale as the surrogate storyteller.

When words are studied because they contribute to gaining understanding in a meaningful activity, motivation improved tremendously. The story becomes his experiences and the words are linked associatively and meaningfully to that experience. This is not intended to make word study some sort of mysterious and incidental act; if anything it has to follow a definite plan of sequence and organization to make learning more effective for these students. Thus, the word list dictionary approach is particularly applicable to a book such as The Assistant, by Malamud (6) because the style is easy and direct; students are not overburdened by comprehension difficulties in their word study efforts.

Students are asked to study approximately thirty specially chosen words presented in context, using the dictionary to find the meaning intended by the author. The word card method is utilized because many of

the students are haphazard in their word study attempts. Included on the word cards are such items as: pronunciation, appropriate synonyms, and an original sentence devised by the student in order to cement learnings.

The word study project progresses then to contextual analysis using a writer who is strong in providing such examples. I have found Cleaver's Soul On Ice (2) particularly applicable for contextual analysis because he floods the page with multiple and parallel synonyms in his rather effusive style as the following example illustrates:

"I seek a lasting relationship, something permanent in a world of change where all is transitory and ephemeral" Cleaver is an impassioned and controversial writer; he offers students a real education in the power of words to communicate, influence and convert.

Lastly, the students are introduced to structural analysis, through the medium of the novel, Slaughterhouse Five (8). Vonnegut, uses many interesting words illustrating this principle. Although the story is somewhat more complicated, it becomes less so when read aloud because the humorous and ironical aspects then become more obvious. Vonnegut even starts his novel as a typical old storyteller. His first words are: "Listen".

A program of reinforcement and practice is provided in order to maintain learning. Two aspects are emphasized: using the words in conversation and in writing, so as to raise both these special vocabularies to greater levels of consciousness and functioning. According to Deighton (3, p.83), "A student's writing vocabulary will expand in direct proportion to the opportunities he has for writing something that is read and evaluated, and that normally these opportunities are too few". Thus the responsibility of teachers engaged in vocabulary instruction is more than helping students gain greater reading and listening vocabularies of var-

ious depths and abilities; teachers should also provide many opportunities for students to write and speak using these new words as frequently as possible in brief descriptions, essays, diaries, etc. to help students gain command.

Teachers should also make use of the new technologies that provide for greater individualization. In order to improve the listening and speaking vocabularies, tapes and earphones should be used creatively for instructional and practice purposes as in the language laboratory. In addition, we should be devising new techniques of learning incorporating more dynamic approaches to programmed instruction, laboratory experiences and experimenting with the use of language tutors to help students communicate better.

We can be certain that the knowledge and verbal explosions will continue and it will be impossible to keep pace with the proliferating informational input. Perhaps we should heed the warning of Alving Toffler, author of Future Shock, that "education must shift into the future sense" (7, p.427). He prophesizes that "tomorrow's illiterate will not be the man who can't read; he will be the man who has not learned how to learn" (7, p.414). He is probably right.

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